RODENTZ

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BOOK TWO: THE HYBRID WAR

Prologue — The Bat in the Dark

The city had gone quiet.

Not peaceful.

Quiet.

There was a difference.

From the roof of an abandoned factory, Megan Waller watched the lights of Hawthorne Academy flicker in the distance.

The school had once been a place where ordinary teenagers learned algebra, history, and biology.

Now it was a fortress.

A refuge for hybrids.

A place where kids with feathers, scales, fur, claws, tails, wings, and other impossible mutations could hide from the outside world.

Max Hawthorne called it a sanctuary.

Megan called it a cage.

Behind her stood dozens of hybrids.

Some were barely older than the students inside Hawthorne Academy.

Others had been changed months earlier and had spent that time running from frightened adults, police, soldiers, and anyone else who believed the hybrids were dangerous.

A fox-eared boy tightened the straps on his backpack.

A girl with antlers stared toward the school.

A massive bear hybrid stood silently near the edge of the roof.

Megan turned toward them.

“We spent months hiding,” she said.

Nobody spoke.

“We hid in basements. Abandoned buildings. Tunnels. Forests. Anywhere humans couldn’t find us.”

Her wings unfolded slightly.

“While Max Hawthorne built himself a kingdom.”

A few hybrids murmured.

Megan pointed toward the distant school.

“They tell you Max is protecting you.”

She smiled bitterly.

“He’s protecting his idea of what hybrids should be.”

The others listened.

“We didn’t ask for this.”

Megan’s voice hardened.

“But we’re here now.”

She looked toward the academy.

“So let’s stop running.”

Chapter One — The Academy

Suna woke to the sound of screaming.

She sat upright.

For a moment she didn’t know where she was.

Then she remembered.

Hawthorne Academy.

The dormitory.

The Change.

Her quills brushed against the pillow.

Suna climbed out of bed and hurried into the hallway.

Students were already running toward the windows.

“What happened?”

“Look outside!”

Suna pushed through the crowd.

Beyond the academy’s fence, something moved between the trees.

Then another.

And another.

Hundreds of silhouettes.

Max appeared at the end of the hallway.

His expression changed when he looked outside.

“Everyone stay inside.”

A student laughed nervously.

“Why?”

Max didn’t answer.

Because they could all see them now.

Hybrids.

An army.

And at the center stood Megan.

She raised one hand.

The army stopped.

Then she looked directly toward the academy.

Even from this distance, Suna could see the anger in her eyes.

Max stepped toward the window.

“Megan.”

Suna swallowed.

“She’s here.”

Max nodded.

“She’s finally decided to stop asking.”

A loud metallic crash echoed across the campus.

The outer gate shook.

Students screamed.

Max turned around.

“Everyone to the shelter.”

“But what about you?”

“I’m staying.”

Suna stared at him.

“You can’t fight all of them.”

Max looked at the frightened students surrounding him.

“No.”

He glanced back toward Megan’s army.

“But maybe we don’t have to.”

Chapter Two — Megan’s Army

Megan had spent months building something Max never believed she could.

An army.

Not soldiers.

Not monsters.

Hybrids.

Every one of them had a reason to hate the world.

Some had been chased from their homes.

Some had lost family members.

Some had been experimented on.

Others simply wanted revenge.

Megan had given them somewhere to belong.

She had given them a purpose.

But there was something she hadn’t told them.

She didn’t intend to stop with Hawthorne Academy.

The academy was only the beginning.

Her real target was the government facility where the first hybrid research had begun.

And she believed the students at Hawthorne were standing between her and that goal.

Especially Max.

Chapter Three — Suna

Suna didn’t trust Megan.

But she didn’t completely trust Max either.

That was the problem.

Max wanted the hybrids protected.

Megan wanted them free.

And Suna couldn’t decide which one was right.

She remembered what the world had been like before the Change.

Teachers.

Parents.

School buses.

Normal mornings.

She wondered if any of that could ever return.

Then she looked at her hands.

Tiny quills covered her fingers.

Normal was gone.

Maybe Megan was right.

Maybe fighting was inevitable.

But Suna didn’t want to become someone who believed violence was the only answer.

That was when she realized something.

If Megan and Max went to war, the hybrids would lose.

No matter who won.

Chapter Four — The First Breach

The academy’s eastern fence collapsed just after midnight.

Megan’s army poured through.

Alarms screamed.

Students scattered through the corridors.

Max and several older hybrids rushed toward the breach.

Suna followed.

“Stay behind me!” Max shouted.

“I can help!”

“You’re not a fighter!”

Suna stopped.

That sentence hurt more than she expected.

Not because Max meant to insult her.

Because she knew he believed it.

A shadow passed overhead.

Megan landed on the roof.

She looked down at Max.

“Still protecting them?”

Max stared upward.

“Still pretending you’re saving them?”

Megan’s expression hardened.

“You’ve got children hiding behind you.”

“So do you.”

“They’re not children.”

Megan spread her wings.

“They’re survivors.”

The two stared at each other.

Then Megan jumped.

Chapter Five — The Truth About the Elders

During the chaos, Suna discovers a sealed laboratory beneath the academy.

Inside she finds records belonging to the Elders.

The files reveal something terrifying.

The Change wasn’t random.

The Elders knew it was coming.

They had known for years.

And Max had never been told the entire truth.

Suna finds one final document.

A projection activates.

A scientist appears.

“If you’re seeing this, the Change has already begun.”

Suna watches.

“The mutations are accelerating.”

The recording glitches.

“There will be a second stage.”

Suna freezes.

A diagram appears.

Nine genetic patterns.

Nine original mutations.

And beneath them:

THE FIRST NINE.

Suna recognizes her own designation.

Her heart pounds.

She isn’t just one of thousands.

She is one of the originals.

Part Two — WAR

Megan’s attack forces Hawthorne Academy into lockdown.

Max organizes the students into defensive groups.

Megan establishes her headquarters in an abandoned industrial district.

Neither side realizes that someone else is manipulating the conflict.

The Elders begin disappearing.

Hybrid communication networks are sabotaged.

And mysterious creatures begin appearing around both camps.

Suna becomes convinced that the war between Megan and Max is distracting everyone from something much bigger.

Meanwhile, Megan discovers that one of her closest commanders has secretly been working for the Elders.

Her army begins to fracture.

Part Three — THE FIRST NINE

Suna finally confronts Max about the secret files.

“You knew.”

Max shakes his head.

“I didn’t.”

“Then who did?”

Neither has an answer.

Megan arrives.

For the first time, Suna, Max, and Megan stand together.

The three enemies discover that the Elders have been studying the First Nine because those nine hybrids may possess abilities capable of changing every other hybrid.

Suna is one of them.

Megan is another.

And Max is a third.

The war suddenly has a new meaning.

Whoever controls the First Nine could control the future of the hybrids.

Part Four — THE FALL OF HAWTHORNE

The academy is attacked again.

This time, Megan isn’t responsible.

A mysterious force overwhelms both armies.

Students and rebels are forced to fight side by side.

Max saves Megan.

Megan saves Max.

Neither acknowledges it afterward.

Suna discovers that the attackers aren’t trying to kill the hybrids.

They’re trying to capture them.

One by one.

The academy falls.

The students are forced into the surrounding wilderness.

Hawthorne Academy burns behind them.

Max looks at the ruins.

“We lost.”

Megan shakes her head.

“No.”

She looks toward Suna.

“We just lost our hiding place.”

Final Chapter — The New World

Weeks later, the remaining hybrids gather deep underground.

There is no academy anymore.

No sanctuary.

No army.

No safe place.

But something has changed.

Megan no longer commands an army.

Max no longer runs a school.

Instead, they are building something neither believed possible.

A community.

Together.

Suna stands before hundreds of hybrids.

She looks at Max.

Then Megan.

Then everyone else.

“We spent so long asking whether we were human.”

She looks down at her quills.

“Maybe that’s the wrong question.”

Silence.

“Maybe we’re supposed to become something new.”

A distant rumble shakes the underground chamber.

Everyone looks upward.

Suna’s expression changes.

The rumble becomes louder.

Then the lights go out.

A voice echoes through the darkness.

“The First Nine have awakened.”

Suna looks toward Megan.

Megan looks toward Max.

Max whispers:

“Run.”

Something enormous roars above them.

TO BE CONTINUED…

END OF BOOK TWO